

The Times of Halcott

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WHAT ARE WE TO DO WITH SUCH A RICH LEGACY?

Pattie Kelder on Ralph Darmstadt

The Revered Ralph Darmstadt spent many of his nearly 94 years here in the Catskills. Those of us who knew him didn't have him long enough. Those who didn't, missed one of life's greatest treasures. Simply put, Ralph was a legend in his own time.

Much has been said and written about this man, who died on January 8th following a massive stroke. Rather than duplicate these accounts, please visit the website of the *Gormley Funeral Home*, in Phoenicia (obituary), the Facebook page of the "*Memorial United Methodist Church Shandaken*", (the January 13, 2024 funeral service and the April 23, 2023 worship service honoring Ralph), plus a Vimeo recording, <https://vimeo.com/75352034/5a633b404f>, where Ralph's self-eulogy can be viewed. This eulogy resulted after someone told him that "no one comforts people like you do at their time of greatest need". Even people who didn't know Ralph have reported feeling uplifted after watching it.

"Rev. D", as many knew him, was an amazing individual. He accomplished far more in one lifetime than the average bear. His optimism, curiosity, zest for life, reverence, compassion, awe, and sense of connection were boundless. He cared deeply about his family, his church flocks, and each community in which he lived. Ralph had a way of grasping a need, envisioning its solution, finding a venue, securing funding, and structuring a program—unheralded and often unnoticed—then stepping aside once it was firmly established. In such manner, numerous undertakings came to fruition. For example, he established New York City's first anti-poverty program and its first Head Start Program early in his career; then the Darmstadt Shelter for the Homeless in Kingston emerged mid-career; and finally, Catskill Neighbors took root in his retirement. Ralph continued to watch the progress of each from behind the scenes, quietly supplying what was needed until there was no danger of it floundering. He took overnight shifts at the Shelter to give workers a night off. He even donated his monetary NYS AARP annual senior citizen award to Catskill Neighbors. In large part, though, Ralph's kindnesses were anonymous and at his own expense, never to be known by us. But to the recipients his outreach made all the difference. Just ask the former struggling student who discovered from Ralph his own worth as a person. Just ask the former youth group member inspired to enter the ministry by Ralph's selfless example. Just ask anyone who met him when up against the odds.

For Ralph, being a pastor was not a nine-to-five job or even a profession; it was a true spiritual calling. Ministry was the farthest thing from his mind when he encountered God personally late one evening in a little unlocked church. That experience changed his life. As a result, he left his thriving nursery business on Long Island to embark on a seemingly impossible call to Christian service, matched only by his sheer determination to honor it. Three colleges later he graduated with a seminary degree.

Ralph always considered the whole community to be his parish, not just the denomination with which he was affiliated. Not only was his approach ecumenical, it was also extended to those on the lower end of the societal totem pole. As a result, his superiors and local government officials took a dim view of his efforts. In fact, he was downright unpopular in some circles for helping the unfortunate.

Often the churches to which Ralph was appointed could barely pay him a subsistence wage. Nevertheless, this proverbial patron saint of lost causes had the vision and tenacity needed to conduct the ministry entrusted to him. Most programs he started have survived the test of time. Perhaps surprisingly, they remain outside the auspices of the church. Why? Ralph wanted them kept accessible to people of all faiths and all walks of life.

Ralph had deep connections with his Maker and with Creation as a whole. He led by example—much as Jesus did. The natural world fascinated him, providing an endless source of wonder and delight. He marveled at the night sky and soaked up the writings of John Burroughs. Ralph even brought a stethoscope to the Halcott Sunday School once so the children could go next door and hear the sap rising in Donald Bouton's maple trees.

Ralph did not sit behind a desk. He was all about service. His message was of love and acceptance. Whenever moving to a new area, Ralph knocked on doors and introduced himself. He wrote letters to every visitor who signed the church guest book. He visited the home-bound in their loneliness, then was surprised when their gratitude resulted in bequests to the church.

Basically, Ralph could be found wherever his parishioners were. He did whatever was necessary to help people. He drew them together and worked tirelessly to develop a sense of community. Ralph's days encompassed everything from locating families in the projects for whom he had no address, to helping farmers bale hay, to sewing quilts with the Ladies Aid, to accompanying scared kids to court dates, to finding the homeless under bridges, to teaching personal investment strategies to women, to hosting church art shows, to cooking for crowds, to—you-name-it. No task was too small. Nothing was beneath him. He studied local demographics and petitioned the halls of government for funding (yes, even in Washington, and yes, in person on his own dime). He wasted no time and always hit the ground running. Every act was accompanied by ringing laughter, tender compassion, or uncompromising toughness, as the situation required.

After pastoring churches in Iowa for about five years, Ralph moved to his first church in New York. It was located in a gang-ridden, rundown section of Brooklyn near the projects. At first, the situation was overwhelming. From the window of his garden level office, though, he noticed a little dandelion struggling to grow in a crack in the sidewalk. No matter how often it was trodden upon,

it continued to grow—until at last, it bloomed. Just as gradually, Ralph took heart, and what he accomplished in those seven or eight years was staggering. He arranged for city buses to transport children to Sunday School, and their parents to church *free of charge*. Can you imagine?? The Youth Center he opened to pull kids away from gang influence grew to 200 members. He even fed addicts, prostitutes and the homeless from his own table. When one of his daughters objected, he explained, “I *have* to invite them. . . they might be Jesus!”

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (—Matthew 25:35-36)

Naturally, some of these guests took advantage of him. The parsonage was robbed on several occasions while the family was visiting Ralph's brother in the Catskills. Ralph was even awakened by late night phone calls. On one occasion, a man down on his luck, so to speak, wanted Ralph to meet him in a nearby cemetery. Always willing to risk himself, Ralph set out on foot in the dark. En route, he encountered a police officer who inquired his mission. When the officer offered to accompany him, Ralph declined, fearing he might scare the man off. Not surprisingly, Ralph was robbed that night. He was relieved of not only what little cash he had, but also of his shoes. Later in time, when the man's circumstances improved, he remorsefully returned to pay Ralph for what he had stolen. The poignant reason for the robbery was that his daughter had no shoes.

Some of the youth also gave Ralph a run for his money. Ralph had been a track star in high school, so he was up to the pursuit, even if it meant vaulting subway turnstiles. One night when he reached out to grab a kid's collar, he was startled to end up holding a handful of hair. The teenager had been wearing a wig!! How Ralph laughed when telling this story. Yet there was method to the chase. Any time a youth was caught, there was a private conversation about aspirations. If the youngster wanted to learn how to play the piano, Ralph procured a piano. If art lessons were desired, Ralph found a volunteer teacher. And so, one by one, teens left the streets and the youth group grew.

You might wonder what shaped Ralph's character and faith. For starters, his parents and grandparents cultivated in him a deep sense of caring for others and a solid work ethic. His mother, a nurse, ran a private nursing home and taught young Ralph how to help residents thrive. His father, a breadwinner for eight children, taught him to notice what needed to be done and then to simply do it . . . without waiting to be asked.

Fortunately, Ralph was reasonably well-behaved as a youngster, but boys will be boys. Ralph once told about acquiring something that didn't belong to him. It seems there were tree branches hanging over the line fence that beckoned him to sample some fruit. Finally, after checking to see if anyone was looking, Ralph helped himself to those luscious apples and slipped under his front porch to feast on them. This went on for several days. Eventually, his father noticed. He pointed out to Ralph that it was wrong to steal, and Ralph's conscience never let him pilfer again.

In time the Darmstadt neighborhood started to change. There was quite a stir when first Jewish

family took up residence. Ralph's father, however, had other ideas. He gathered his family together and explained that the new neighbors were different, and even unwelcomed. Then he made it clear that *his* family was to extend kindness to the newcomers.

These skills and lessons learned from his parents accompanied Ralph throughout his ministry. Emulating his mother, he took training as a nurses' aide for a side job to make ends meet, then in later years provided caregiver respite by sitting with the home-bound. His father's maxim moved Ralph to lifelong action. He swept litter outside his Brooklyn church each morning until other property owners joined his attack on urban blight. Then in later years he crafted no nonsense rules for the Darmstadt Shelter requiring residents to observe curfew, do light housekeeping, attend to personal grooming and conduct job searches.

Ralph was profoundly impacted by heart wrenching circumstances in his personal life. Yet he never complained. Statistically, many experiencing similar challenges go on to become welfare recipients, addicts or face incarceration. Not Ralph. Self-pity was pointless. As a result, we saw little of his anguish. Instead, the compassion, generosity, wisdom, grace and humor forged by hard times was what got our attention. We heard his reassuring recitation of *Psalm 139*, the Psalm that sustained him in Iowa. We saw the light of Christ shining in him.

*You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and even the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you." (—Psalm 139: 8-12)*

Ralph had a knack for learning how to spot and help others in need, having been there himself. As *a child*, he had been devastated by the death of an infant brother. As *an adult*, he sat at hospital bedsides, making sure none of his flock had to die alone. As *a child*, Ralph was severely hearing impaired—he couldn't read or write until he was 27 years old. He aged out of high school and flunked out of colleges until two ladies in Iowa took charge and taught him to read. As *an adult*, Ralph returned the favor, becoming a substitute teacher who worked with struggling students in order to supplement his meager income as a pastor. As *a child*, teachers seated Ralph in the back of the classroom by a window with a box of crayons to keep him occupied. There, his keen powers of observation and artistic talents were honed. As *an adult*, Ralph beautifully captured the marvels of creation in media that included exquisite, handcrafted greeting cards.

Ralph faced other challenges, too. His wife was ill throughout their marriage, so he had to balance family care with breadwinning. His first churches in Iowa were so poor he had to forage for greens and berries along the RR tracks and make ketchup sandwiches for his children. When offered refreshments at the homes of parishioners, he declined. He couldn't enjoy them knowing his children were going without. Eventually divorce thrust him into single fatherhood, which he juggled with as many as four churches at a time in addition to side jobs. Through the years, his extended family navigated financial loss, life-threatening illnesses, incarceration, addiction, and homelessness. Yet, Ralph remained resilient. Each of these experiences informed how he reached out to others in similar circumstances.

Ralph's life was far more than a litany of trials, though. For one thing, he refused to dwell on the negative. For another, unquenchable humor brightened his outlook and spilled over into the stories he told. Ralph just had a propensity to tell on himself. One day in Iowa, some hapless chickens decided to cross the road in front of his car. He couldn't stop. Aghast, he picked them up by the feet, presented himself at the door of the house, sheepishly confessing to the farmer's wife that he had run over her chickens. His laughter over such mishaps continues to live on in the minds of his hearers.

Fast forward a few years. While informally enumerating the homeless of Kingston, Ralph came across a homeless man with, of all things, an electric blanket. Sure enough, the man was sleeping in a bank entrance that had an exterior electrical outlet! By then, Ralph knew he had to do something about the “non-existent” homeless that the city fathers were ignoring. Until permanent suitable quarters could be arranged, he started putting them up in his church overnight. Since this was a code violation, guests had to turn out at dawn, stow sleeping bags amid the organ pipes and hit the job search trail early enough to escape detection. When Ralph was finally able to open the shelter, it was Christmas Eve. His first guests that night were a man and his nine months pregnant wife. Such symbolism wasn't lost on Ralph. When the couple eventually got back on firm footing, they returned to seek out Ralph, introduce him to their growing child, and offer their heartfelt thanks for his help.

Ralph had a gift for comforting people who were grieving. For him, it wasn't enough to just show up to perform a standard funeral service. It was important for him to pay a home visit, attend all the visiting hours, and personally reassure the grieving family and friends. He engaged as many as possible in conversation, learning what made the deceased special to them. Then he followed

up with after-care for as long as necessary. In this way, Ralph performed hundreds of weddings and funerals. Much of what he said was extemporaneous; not much was scripted. Eventually, the march of time took its toll. Privately, Ralph had to admit he was forgetting details and losing his train of thought during these services. In truth, however, there had been a few public slip ups in prior decades. One these happened in a service that is infrequently celebrated, a Confirmation Service. On that Sunday, Ralph's book fell open to a customary page and he began addressing the group of young teens with the words, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to . . . *whoops!* Wrong page!" Ever able to laugh at himself, he quickly located the correct service and started over.

Then there was an unmentioned funeral "oops". This was because Ralph was unaware of his mistake. During the final prayer in a packed service, his cadence of speech slowed, his rich vocal tones deepened, and he tenderly spoke the name of the departed. After a slight pause, he added the title, "Jr." —Yikes! Eyes flew open mid-prayer, none more startled than Jr., himself, who was still very much alive and grieving the death of "Sr." Mourners must have thought rumors of Jr.'s death were greatly exaggerated, but to the credit of good Catskill Mountain breeding, not a single gasp was heard.

Ralph formally served the Halcott United Methodist Church part time from 1994 to 2001 while construction on his Red Kill home was being finalized, and in retirement he returned to this pulpit to serve communion and preach when the regular pastor was absent. He loved Halcott dearly and paid attention to the smallest of details. When a restless toddler wandered near the altar during his sermon, he picked up the child and continued preaching, joking about him being a pastor in training. When the bathroom was constructed, he found someone to bankroll a waterless toilet, then made sure a full-length mirror was installed for brides. Ralph designed the removable ramp rail that allows easy side door access for caskets. He secured a watertight time capsule for the congregation to fill. He put down an area rug so toddlers would have a comfortable place to play. He made sure children had ice cream whenever they assembled mission packages at the Grange Hall. In his nineties, he even offered to help trustees procure grants for church repairs. He thought of everything.

In 2023, vision loss finally cost Ralph his independence and he had to leave his Red Kill home. Years earlier, his children had kidded him about reserving a room for him on the 4th floor of Mountainside Residential Care Center. (Since Mountainside only has three floors, they really meant the roof!) Fortunately, his daughters were able to take him into their homes and nursing home care was never needed. Ralph's family brought him back to Halcott in December for the Christmas Candlelight Service. He was overjoyed to be in fellowship with the congregation again and filled with excitement over being invited to share the pulpit with Pastor Debb on Easter Sunday. Alas, it was not to be; Christmas was his last holiday among us. At Ralph's funeral we learned he had seen angels in church at the Christmas Candlelight Service. Perhaps they were God's way of preparing him to spend Easter with Halcott folks after all—the dearly departed ones, who had gone home ahead of him.

What are we to do with such a rich legacy? Ralph would have us step out boldly to do the work of loving God and neighbor. He would have us spend more time gathering in fellowship with others. He would have us adhere to our convictions even when they are unpopular. He would

have us greet each new day with joy. He would have us marvel over the intricacies of creation. He would have us spend ourselves in Christlike service to one another. All this, and so much more will keep his memory and legacy alive if we stay the course. What a wonderful life it will be!

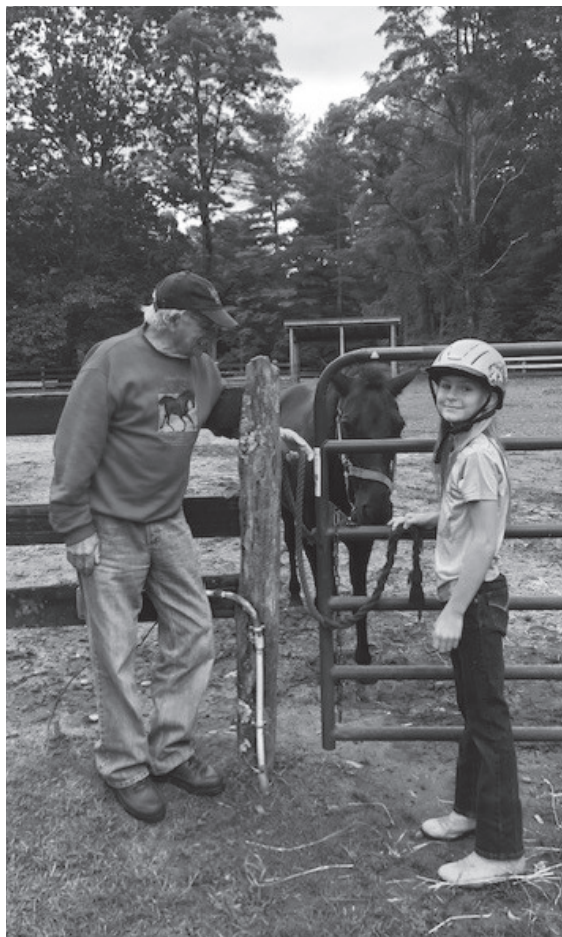


A circuit rider medallion, sometimes awarded posthumously to United Methodist clergymen.

For many years after Francis Asbury planted Methodist Churches on the east coast there were no resident pastors. Circuit riders made the rounds to multiple churches by horseback on a regional basis. In this manner, a congregation might see a pastor perhaps 2-3 times a year. The late Paul Steinfeld (former Halcott resident and President of Congregation B'nai Israel) was familiar with Biblical botany. He told us that as the Almond is the first tree to flower in Israel, so the Service Berry is the first to flower here in the Catskills. (Both of these natives happen to have white blooms.) The Service Berry has other names, like Shad Blow (signifying the timing of the northward shad run in the Hudson River) and Bilberry (sparse berries quickly nabbed by birds—they made good pies the one year we saw a bumper crop). Paul said the name “Service Berry” corresponded to the time in early spring when the circuit rider would arrive for services and to perform weddings.

Ralph's family was very moved by this tribute, especially given Ralph's love of horses—he owned a Morgan and raised its filly for a few years in Red Kill, And so it will be mounted on Ralph's tombstone.





My friend Ralph and I went horseback riding at Gene's. They used to ride for miles and miles many years ago. When we got to Gene's barn, we saddled up our horses. I was riding a black pony named Maple Syrup, her nickname was Maple. Gene was on his Paint. Ralph was riding a fiery, skittish Buckskin who was nervous about birds and other animals. We rode on a trail through the woods and along a roaring river. It was a beautiful late August afternoon. Ralph and I were riding close together when Maple decided it was too close and tried to kick his horse. It was an exciting ride! Ralph was so happy to ride again. I had a wonderful time being Ralph's horse pen pal and we had a magnificent ride that day!



—Carmen Norwick

Forest Swimming

by Carrie Bradley

"I guess sometimes surviving is your punishment. So, you stand in the river, facing upstream with the water rushing down upon you as if it could somehow fill the hollow emptiness—and somehow, it always does."

—Steve Ramirez, *Casting Forward*

1.

Yes, I feel lucky to be alive. For a while it was direly touch and go, in body or mind or both, which I guess is just life and death, or both. And it hasn't been an easy ride since—so, thank you, river!

As I write, there's snow in the forecast and so ahead of us lie a few more weeks of equinoctial brown, mud-season brown. But the redwing blackbirds are home, first as always, blowing their crossing-guard whistles and flashing their crimson epaulettes. Perhaps because of my river habitat, the song sparrows came next. And, only then, the robins. Sweeping in flocks of family-tree glee. Wind-sprinting, then stopping on a dime to gather all the vibrations beneath. Flying in their snap-line-straight shots. Fluting chirrups every wing beat or two at takeoff. Heralding! Then, too, returns the joy of what I call Robin Hour, when those red-breasts take to the treetops and serenade the sunset. No wonder so many songs and sayings about them have come, literally hopping along.

I received lots of photos from friends in the lowlands during the warm snap, of crocus and daffodils and forsythia, but no matter how you drive it, this has been a wackadoodle winter and spring. Up here, at least in my microclimate, almost everything is still rendered in line-drawing monochrome. Even that faintest tinge, a change in the ambient light (or is that actually just a feeling?) which comes when green dawns, when red buds emerge shiny-shelled on so many resurrecting plants and trees—that hasn't yet set in.

But it will, soon enough, and then with burst and bloom—snowstorms (and an eclipse!) between now and then notwithstanding—Chartreuse Spring will arrive. This is what I call it (yeah, so, I like to name things), when every new blade within until-now dormant lawns and meadows and hayfields and pine boughs and leaf buds and garlic tops and seedlings are all aglow at the same time, and the landscape from bottom to top becomes a field of that new, newer, newest brightest of greens, and dreams.

There is a medicinal practice called "forest bathing" that was captured and quantified by Japanese doctor Qing Li in the 1980s (with a wonderful book that lays it out). It is rooted, of course, in the healing and spiritual qualities found in nature, revered in cultures throughout time—and may be seen, by some cynics, as a trendy pop-culture way to talk about a walk in the woods. But the focus, purpose, and mindfulness of a different way of forest-journeying brings perspective, connection, and added benefits to mental and physical health. As the rare bipeds moving through the forest, we with our great big brains, it's a trick to make the switch.

The principle is easy: settle into calm and quiet when you enter the woods. Breathe deeply and

observe closely every tiny detail around you. Engage *all* five senses, counting them off. (There are wonderful things to safely taste, even if just the air itself.) The experience is an antidote to stress, depression, anxiety, distraction, and pain. The recommended time is 20 to 30 minutes, but that's obviously just a ballpark (or wild country park?) figure. Physical aches and pains may actually disappear, especially with regular practice. The engagement ultimately leads to a relaxation deep into the exquisite, timeless, powerful calm of the forest, the trees. And it brings a reminder to bend with the wind, to breathe through our thick skins, and (again, cliché as it might seem) to connect with the cycle of life. To get all science-y on you, why it's good for your health, this practice: it can reduce your blood pressure, boost your immune system. Forests are also chockful of phytoncides, which are anti-microbial compounds released by trees and plants. And all that oxygen—!

I call it forest “swimming” here because, well, I don't have a bathtub. But I do have a river, and I love to swim. While a warm bath is another of my passions, and bathing is a concept that pairs well with the idea of pausing to float in the forest, it seems like the gentle motion of swimming slowly, drifting with the currents, matches the concept as well—or better, because slightly more active—like the living ecosystem. While we may find god in the woods, there are so many other sacred companions swimming all round us: the trees pulsing their sap, the leeks and lady slippers and early lilacs and dandelions and all the cold-weather crops drinking in the dew, the babies of trout and the sleepest of frogs swimming and gilling, the grubs and worms twisting and dancing and searching beneath the topsoil, the spring-born ants that run seemingly pell-mell (“I'm late, I'm late!”) along a short stick or pebble, the birds and squirrels making confetti of dried dead leaves, the moles and voles and all the souls sleeping suspended in the soil.

“Why, oh, why do you humans,” quoth the blackbird, “so often drift so far away, hiding from those things which will save us, just when we need them most?” In the darkest times of my hardest challenges, I missed so many opportunities to walk in the woods, to enter the hallowed dappled light of the forest—to walk, solitary, or with the people I loved.

2.

My mother taught me how to grow potatoes. I had, until then, when fixin' for dinner, no idea what those undesirable “eyes” were, what they could or would grow into. She also taught me how to tie a clover chain, and how to choose the perfect blade of grass to make a reed for a whistle. She reveled in light as she painted and sculpted, always turned her face to the sun when it shone—and reveled, as well, in wild water, in lakes and rivers and seas. I'm so grateful we got to bring her for one final visit to the ocean, where she sat in a chair and just let the tides wash over her.

Beside all her turmoil, her troubles—because she was often angry and erratic—there were always those potatoes. She taught me how to arrange flowers in a vase; she loved daffodils and daylilies the most, and knew how wide the mouth of the vase or jar should be, how to harmonize stem heights, how to make a home pretty and cozy. And she gave me the courage to make of a life of art.

And she passed on to me the understanding that it's a spiritual experience to lie on one's belly in the grass, as I have since I was a child and as I still do—nose to nose with the larvae, ants, beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, with the tiny almost earthbound moths, stink bugs and spiders, micro mosses, and all the other itty-bitties. As intimate as knowing the pores and lashes and dimples

and fingerprints of the person you love. She called me her “little fish.” And sure, I am her spawn because, just like her, I love to swim and be immersed in any water, domestic or wild. But she was also driven by a need to blame, and an insatiable need to control—so I’ve had to learn how to navigate those crosscurrents in myself. She even taught me, unintentionally I suppose, how to forgive. It didn’t come easily, if at all, to her—like accepting change, another difficult lesson. I’ve learned little by little, *‘from both sides now’*, how to forgive the imperfections: in her, in me, in all of us; how to reconcile myself to the fear, the complexity, the anger, how to soothe the seismic damage of mental illness. Her last request was that her remains be cast into flowing waters—so fistfuls of her ashes were scattered to rivers, to the Mississippi, to the Hudson, to the Chemung, to the Delaware, to the Clark Fork.

Every time I wade through my own river, I stop and turn over big flat stones just to look at the life growing on the bottoms. Slimy, small, yet mighty—mayfly, caddisfly, and stonefly larvae that will hatch and live for a winged day, or feed the fish and the life of the river and all it gives—prehistoric and portentous at the same time. My guidance has come from everything, everywhere—from the flight of the warblers to Dr. Qing’s forest lessons, from Roscoe the yellow lab who swims with me to my friend who’s teaching me how to fish (finally!)...from, heck, my very own DNA, and from the constant commentary of the river itself.

Get belly-down in the grass, cling to the banks of rivers surrounded by native berries and the fairy-flappings of pollinators, wade through knee-to-ankle-high water, grasses, to arrive at the wells of forgiveness and the bath of the forest.

No tub for this fish. I love chopping kindling and lighting a fire, but I don’t have a fireplace. But the universe sends us the things we need or love, and ways to express our love and who we are, as it will. I love sharing food and thoughts and words and laughs with a friend, or with a stranger in a random encounter, and that will always be my hearth. We can draw deep, from topsoil to loam to water table to the hot fires at the center of the earth, and continue to have hope, loyalty, joy, forgiveness, and give what we can. When we lose things, we gain insight. A love of the earth, love of the cycle of seasons, gratitude for another new day, knowing things are always growing—these are ours if we keep all five of our senses open in the swim.

There is the sudden vacuum where things you once loved were, and the feeling doesn’t go away. But there is also the mayfly that lives for a day above a trout that has lived for years in a river holler that has flowed for centuries below the hundred-year-old trees that are its sentries. Epic, awful, awe-filled, we just need to cast forward. Don’t delay, do not miss it, don’t miss your chance. Spring is the season of action, renewal, forgiveness of our sins, of ourselves, not just accepting change but embracing it. Your woods and forests and ponds and streams await you. And the rivers *will* flow. All the way to the sea, we can rise like spring.



Into the Weeds: *Plantago*

by Lem Srolovic

Every farmer, even a casual gardener or a landscaper, knows a lot about weeds—which plants are weeds, which are not, how to best the weeds, if possible, and if not, how to live under an uneasy truce.

Our language reflects our values. Weeds are bad. We battle weeds with our minds and our bodies, and with our pocketbooks too. In an analysis of global expenditures on pesticides between 2008 and 2012, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that of the nearly \$56 billion spent on pesticides at the producer level during those four years, plant-killing chemicals consistently accounted for the largest portion annually.

The Encyclopedia Britannica frames weeds in terms of enemies and friends, who sometimes change places: “Weed is a general term for any plant growing where it is not wanted. Ever since humans first attempted the cultivation of plants, they have had to fight the invasion by weeds into areas chosen for crops. Some unwanted plants later were found to have virtues not originally suspected and so were removed from the category of weeds and taken under cultivation. Other cultivated plants, when transplanted to new climates, escaped cultivation and became weeds or invasive species. The category of weeds thus is ever changing, and the term is a relative one.”

Indigenous ecological scientist and Ph.D. botanist Robin Wall Kimmer frames weeds in terms of a difference in the relation between plants and humans. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Professor Kimmer writes that weeds and other plants give humans gifts from the earth. If we are open to receiving those gifts, a relationship grows, with an obligation to give *and* receive, to reciprocate.

Plantago, or plantain, a family of weeds found in the Catskills and around the world, embody this paradigm. *Plantago* has been used by humans to treat cuts, burns, other wounds and various ailments since ancient times. In the first known western pharmacopeia, 1st Century Greek physician Pedanius Dioscorides included a *Plantago* in his *De Materia Medica*, prescribing it to treat dog bites. And beyond their medicinal powers, *Plantago* are edible by humans, and nutritious.



A native of Eurasia, the relationship between *Plantago* and humans grew strong. Indeed, *Plantago* and humans likely acted as selective evolutionary forces on each other, with the thriving of each helping the other to flourish. Research on pollen shows that *Plantago* was introduced into the Nordic region parallel to the first cultivated fields approximately 4,000 years ago, in the Stone Age. In the area now known as North America, *Plantago* came with the early European colonizers, reportedly including the Puritans.

Indeed, *Plantago* grows so well in ground disturbed by human settlements—paths, roadways and, more recently, lawns—that its name in Latin refers to the sole of the foot. And, in fact, its tiny, long-lived seeds catch rides in socks, shoes, and the cuffs of pants. In North America, indigenous people quickly learned about this newcomer, and built new relationships with these plants, from the North woodlands to the desert Southwest. They named the plant *White Man's Footstep*.

Plantago are so widespread and ubiquitous in North America that we think of them as native species, but they are not. Kimmer describes them as “naturalized,” like humans who are foreign-born but then become citizens of our country. They are here to stay, to live in our community, contributing to our collective health and our shared future.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

26 December, 2023

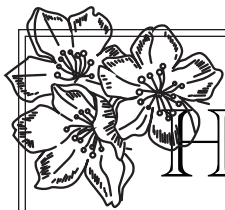
This contribution to *The Times Of Halcott* is in honor of Marjorie Brockman (nee Meyers), who spent all of her youth at Griffin's Farm and continued to enjoy memories and friendships for her entire life from her times in Halcott. My grandparents met in Halcott after World War II. The connection to our family is long and deeply held.

Sincerely,
Lucy (Brockman) Anemone

11 December, 2023

I always enjoy *The Times of Halcott*. The recent piece on Karen and Barbara's care for Hazel was amusing and also quite touching. Whenever I am thanked for being a good neighbor, I reflect that so much of what I know about being a neighbor I learned from the amazing Halcott community—during my childhood time there, as well as during the community's wonderful care for my parents in their later years.

Kind regards to all,
Joe Steinfeld, Beacon, NY



Halcott Bulletin Board



HALCOTT SUMMER FAIR PLANS

The date of the fair has been set for July 20, 2024, from 11AM to 5PM. But, to tell you the truth, community engagement has been somewhat lacking. Julio and I have taken on many tasks in the past year, publishing The Times Of Halcott, reviving/revising the Halcott Holiday Fair, helping with the Halcott Community Garden Plant Sale, and so we just don't feel like we can take a huge bite out of the Summer Fair as well. Peggie Leslie has initiated the effort to bring the Summer Fair back, post-Covid, but by her own admission she is not a full-time resident here and so she has had trouble making connections and drumming up *active* co-operation. In her own words: "*A better known Halcott resident voice may be needed to stir up interest and participation.*" If y'all want the fair to happen, you'll have to not only raise your hand and say "aye" but take some form of action. As it stands now there are few committed vendors or food purveyors. There's been talk of returning to former times with a magician and a sheriff's department canine demonstration, as well as a petting zoo and a raffle. Innovations are more than welcome as well. But steps will have to be taken beforehand, and now is the time to step up to the plate, contacting Peggy with your practical suggestions and how to accomplish them. Send her an email at leslie.peg@gmail.com and let her know if, and how, you can help.

HALCOTT COMMUNITY GARDEN ANNUAL PLANT SALE

The date for the plant sale is Saturday June 1st, the weekend after Memorial Day, from 10-4PM. We'll have plenty of lovingly nursed seedlings for sale, as well as some potted-up perennials and baby trees. The proceeds will go towards our ongoing improvements to the garden itself, which have been proceeding for the past years. We are in the process of replacing the entire garden fence (instead of just repairing those section of it that collapse each winter, ha!), creating a weed-free gravel pathway around the perimeter, and constructing a series of new raised beds to accommodate our growing roster of gardeners. Here are few photos of the upgrade so far.



Do join us at the plant sale, and know that any money you spend there will be translated into a more efficient and more beautiful garden for the whole community to enjoy. If you are interested in joining the garden, all the sign-up information is available online. Just contact us by email with any inquiries, at halcottgarden@gmail.com — and we can send you the link for registration. Happy planting!

HALCOTT HOLIDAY FAIR

Not to bring too much of winter's chill back to mind now that spring is finally settling in over the Catskills, but we did have a great time at the Holiday Fair in December, and photographer Albie Mitchell caught many of the most festive as well as more intimate moments.



CALLING ALL ARTISTS

For the upcoming summer issue to The Times Of Halcott we want to turn to the many artists in our midst. And we mean “artist” in the broadest sense. No matter what your creative endeavor—painting, sculpture, poetry, fiction, pottery, basketry, knitting, gardening, dancing, maple syrup making, baking, anything at all—we want to hear from you! Send us a little note about what you do, with a photo or two, and we will make you famous (at least in our community). The Catskills are a great place for creative solitude, as well as for sharing that creativity with a community. We know you are out there, so step into the spotlight. Email us at thetimesofhalcott@gmail.com.

HALCOTT

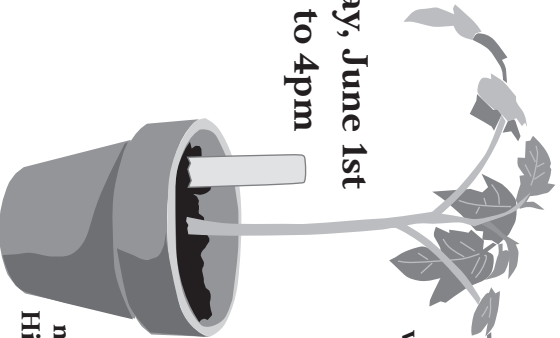
COMMUNITY GARDEN

Spring Plant Sale

Saturday, June 1st

10am to 4pm

with a wide variety
of seedlings and
some perennials



On Ursum Way
next to the Halcott
Highway Department

Also a bake sale!

To benefit the Halcott Community Methodist Church

Come meet your neighbors
and help support the garden and the church